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Blank Silence

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Translator: Simon Pleasance



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REFERENCES

Christin, Anne-Marie. *Poétique du blanc : vide et intervalle dans la civilisation de l'alphabet*, Leuven : Peeters, 2000, (Accent)

Kostelanetz, Richard. *Conversations avec John Cage*, Paris: Ed. des Syrtes, 2000

- 1 Writing came about from the image and its effectiveness issues only from the image". The writings compiled in *Poétique du blanc* extend and greatly develop the thesis broached by Anne-Marie Christin in *L'Image écrite*, published in 1995. The rigorous intelligence at work in both these books is constantly on a par with the considerable theoretical consequences of this thesis, the scope of which is not restricted just to the arena of the history of writing. A-M. Christin is thoroughly aware of this as she pinpoints the formidable and ubiquitous foe she faces: the logocentrism of western thought, which has put writing under the exclusive legislation of the word. To this end, the invention of the alphabet came up with an argument: conceiving of writing exclusively as a graphic representation of the phoneticism of language has actually led to fashioning a teleological history of writing as a path towards alphabetical perfection, by abandoning everything in it that called to mind its birth. This originally Greek, and Platonist, gesture was to be extended to diverse titles by modern historians and anthropologists of writing (Gelb, Fevrier, Goody). It doesn't always bar the image from writing, but it reduces its importance, as something making the system less effective; more broadly still, it leads to the image being exiled from itself, by binding it to its objectal reference and, in the relationship in which we are wont to grasp it, it vanishes as such between the object it represents and the idea and the very name of this object. By favouring this verticality, in which the image is cancelled, western thought, by the same token, removes the space in which images as well as ideograms and letters are all inscribed. By calling for a break with a theory of

perception as identification and nomination of the world's objects, A-M. Christin strives to show that the invention of writing cannot be conceived without “medium thinking”, or “screen thinking”, with an anthropological significance comparable to those of gesture and word (the work of André Leroi-Gourhan often crops up in *L'Image écrite*). Far from being neutral, medium and screen help to bring together the two heterogeneous orders of image and sign: the invention of writing reverts to a reader, not a speaker (a legislating prophet), to a divine reader who reads constellations, and not to a hunter speaker who reads tracks. A-M. Christin thus contrasts instrumental rationality, which refuses to make room for them, with the floating relations brought about between images and signs by the medium incorporating them. *Poétique du blanc* endeavours more precisely to restore the medium's full importance, and the screen's. The analysis of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, which reopens a path shrouded by the iconographic edifice of Erwin Panofsky, the discussion of the icon concept in Pierce and the field concept in Schapiro, the analyses devoted to Fromentin's *Maîtres d'autrefois* (where Schapiro also crops up again), Gatian de Clérambault's photographic work, and Mallarmé's *Coup de dés* all unfurl the beauty of this thinking. But is it because the foe takes up too much room to let the floating world of the visible unfold? Or is this latter essentially doomed to silence? These painstaking analyses, in the modern vein of the book, somewhat give the feeling of an impasse, where appearance, medium, and screen are destined to be no more than the place of an infinite repetition of the origin.

- 2 Richard Kostelanetz has brought together a very sizeable number of interviews given by John Cage to various people from the mid-1950s up until his death. They are arranged in chapters (biography, the forerunners, Cage's music, dance and performance, visual arts, aesthetics, and so on). This book actually provides invaluable material for anyone interested in the work of the person of whom Schoenberg said that he was “not a composer, but an inventor of genius”. This voice which, with tireless intelligence and generosity, takes us through that miraculous American half-century (and hints at how much it still has to teach us), is, on its own, what makes this book so delightful. The importance of the revolution we can associate with John Cage's name can be more accurately gauged on the basis of these *Conversations*, not by drawing from the stuff of the subject matter published in them, but by making a complete tour of the logical consequences of any part of this subject matter. By wanting to reintroduce Cage's thinking on the basis of this book, one is actually tempted by two thoroughly contradictory readings: one where negation takes pride of place, where present music and, taking things further, present, topical, contemporary art could only grasp the many opportunities offered it in the negation of categories, criteria, codes, practices and theories making up their ancient form; the other in which negation no longer plays any part, but seems to stem from a complete affirmation, renewed at any given moment, of what is—as if the negation made were no longer important and were itself denied. Chance operations release the act of doing of any intent; they are the discipline whereby doing is released, delivered from intentionality, more radically than by automatic procedures, for the intention is only renounced in favour of an ego that becomes the echo chamber of the subconscious. As a result, silence can be neither the equivalent nor the medium of the “blank”, nor that of the invisible. It doesn't make anything appear, but it makes it possible to hear: everything is there, everything is noisy. “What interests me in music is sounds”, and it is important to hear. Cage returns to this point over and over again: sounds, not links between sounds. God doesn't make music.